Thyra Quensel's peaceful negotiations

PATRICK COMERFORD witnessed them recently with CND supporters in Brussels

WE were a mixed lot of about 70 or 80 people as we gathered on the street in Brussels' old city centre: an Italian MEP, a Japanese Buddhist monk, a Swiss Protestant pastor, English and Irish Quakers, West German and Irish trade unionists, a Spanish housewife, a young Swede wearing a Solidarity badge, a woman from Alsace who refused to be classified as French or German, but wanted to be listed among the "citizens of the world."

All we had agreed on was that we wanted to bring completed petition forms to NATO headquarters, that we were taking part in non-violent direct action, and that if any questions arose, any decisions had to be taken, any trouble started, we would regroup in a circle, and discuss the matter one at a time, the speaker holding a yellow card.

Within half an hour, a fleet of 16 taxis, one after another, was drawing up outside NATO headquarters — a far more intimidating sight than 70 or 80 people hopping out of one coach. We sat down in a circle, chose one delegate from each of the 16 countries who wanted to be represented in the group going into NATO with the petition, and Thyra Quensel of the West German Greens approached the main gate, announcing who we were and asking to be met.

No, she was told, NATO officials could only meet one person from the group, the rest would have to stay outside. She understood their situation, but had to come back and consult the circle.

When the circle re-grouped, however, no-one agreed to NATO's decision — no one country could be deemed great enough to represent all the others, that was why the US was going ahead forcing its cruise missiles on Europe; no country was too small not to be heard by NATO, that was the problem with Ireland being forced away from traditional neutrality.

Thyra went back to the gate. NATO still refused to accept a full delegation. Was that final? Yes. Well, could she ring the person who gave that order, so she could ask him if he'd change his mind? No.

Was he under orders not to disclose his superior officer's name and telephone number? No. Was he under orders to say no? No, the decision was final. If the delegation didn't want to send in one person, that was that.

Thyra understood the situation, but the circle took decisions, and she'd have to go back to them and explain, or try to explain, that NATO didn't want to meet such a small number of nice, non-violent people.

But when the circle re-grouped, no-one agreed to NATO's decision. If NATO wouldn't meet us inside, then they should have the good nature to come out so we could meet them.

Thyra went back to the gate. The circle would like to receive a delegation from NATO headquarters staff to present them with the signatures to the petition. Would NATO staff come out and meet us? Yes, he would be happy to come out and meet the delegates.

She understood, but would have to go back and consult the circle. Would the circle meet the man inside she had been talking to on the inter-com at the main gates? The circle agreed, but on condition that the staff delegation consisted not just of one man, but of a man and a woman.

Thyra went back to the gate, only to be told that her request couldn't be met: there were no women in NATO headquarters that Sunday afternoon. We could meet one man or meet no-one.

She understood the situation, but had to go back and consult the circle, they made all the decisions. The circle roared heartily. No woman working in NATO? One delegate wanted a roster list of all people working there that afternoon so we could know they were telling us the truth and negotiating in good faith.

Finally it was agreed we would meet a delegation of two men — one of whom would be treated as a woman working in NATO, with all the sexist and discriminatory terms used in the military, and addressed by us as "Mrs".

Thyra went back to the gate. It was the shortest time in all her negotiating. She understood the situation and came back to the circle to report NATO headquarters would receive a delegation of 16, one from each country.

As we went through the electonic check, handing up our passports, the Swiss pastor prayed outside and the Japanese monk banged his dharma drum chanting "Namy myo-ho renge kyo."

Inside, we asked NATO's representative to count almost 400 signatures collected at the European Nuclear Disarmament convention calling on the NATO powers to follow Brezhnev's pledge with their own pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons.

The signatures were counted, the representative signed a receipt and a memorandum both saying he had counted so many signatures to the petition, each at the end of a blank petition form making it clear what the signatures were to.

Helmut from Norway thanked him. Now that he had a blank petition and the number of signatures, the NATO official could convey our feelings to the next NATO council meeting. Yes, the representative muttered as he tried to hold a polite smile.

And Helmut decided NATO had the number of signatures, the list of countries they were from, and no need to hold on to the names and addresses of the activists, which he held on to.

Behind a reinforced glass screen, a line of armed police stood watching our every move in the lobby of NATO headquarters. Could we, such a collection of non-violent activists be seen as a threat to them? A large number of delegates lined up, one-by-one on the other side of the glass screen, waved, said hello, blew kisses.

As we left, the Italian MEP took up the last remaining copies of free NATO magazines on the information rack. They must be well informed in northern Italy today of NATO policy, if they speak Dutch, German, French and Danish.

Outside, about 40 to 45 of us volunteered to form a human CND symbol on the private road in front of NATO's main gates. Sitting cross-legged and clapping our hands, we started chanting "All we are saying is give peace a chance!"

The police stood behind at a distance, and must have found it hard to notice that a paint pot had been taken out and was being passed around in the circle. When they did realise what was happening, they weren't quick enough to stop it being passed from one person to the next as the ground was marked.

Thyra was approached.

Yes, she understood the predicament of the police. Could the circle re-group and discuss whether it wanted to stop painting the ground? The circle re-grouped. It discussed the matter. The police stood behind Thyra.

Discreetly, another paint pot was produced beside me. Eventually, when the decision was taken to stop, we chanted "All we are saying is give peace a chance," and stood up.

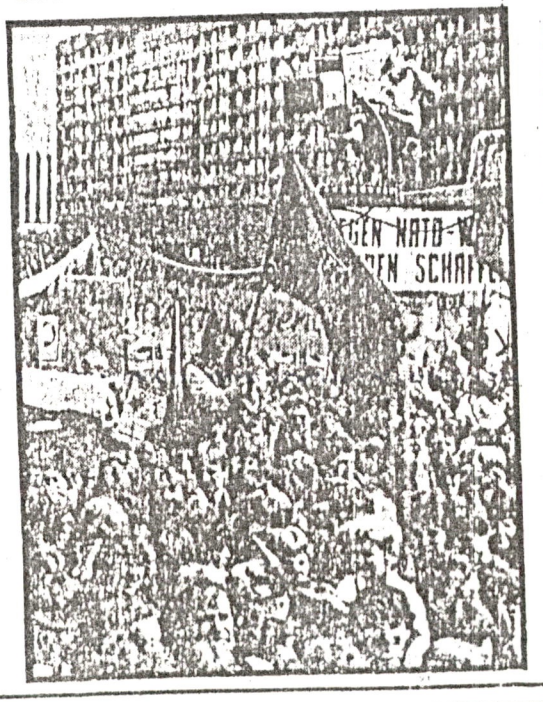
That's all we had to say. As we stood up, it became apparent that a CND symbol had been painted on NATO ground, under the very eyes of the police without one arrest.

Thyra understood their situation.

Could we show our appreciation of the good will of the police, and shake their hands before we went? But the police refused to shake hands. Could we show them they were our brothers, and kiss them good bye?

Other protesters might have used sticks, bottles and stones, but the police would have stood their ground. That afternoon the threat of being kissed by up to 80 pacifists was too much for the police. They beat a hasty retreat to behind the electronic fence.

We had to be content with waving goodbye as the 65 bus pulled out from the terminus for the old city centre of Brussels.



One of the 60,000 young people marching for peace in Dresden as the German Democratic Republic campaigned for nuclear disarmament over Whitsun weekend